

# Reading the Room: Understanding Student Approaches to Respectful Behaviour in Informal Study Space on Campus

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## Abstract

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey identifies libraries as one of the main places where sexual harassment occurs on campus. Yet little research has been undertaken into the nature, cause, and prevention of sexual harassment or disrespectful behaviour in Australian university libraries and informal learning spaces. This study aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of the University of Technology Sydney community on safety and disrespectful behaviour. Our research draws on physical, societal, and cultural ideas of safe spaces, examining how students interpret and regulate respectful and disrespectful behaviour in informal study spaces, and how these practices align with staff understandings of institutional prevention strategies. Drawing on interviews with students and staff, and student workshops to test and refine insights, we identify 'reading the room' as a dominant practice for students in understanding behavioural norms in informal learning environments. This paper discusses the insights gained and how these might impact and shape engagement in the prevention space on university campuses.

**Keywords:** Student safety; informal learning spaces; university libraries; social norms; gender-based violence prevention; respectful behaviour; campus culture; student belonging.

## Introduction

Australian universities are operating in a period of significant reform in which student equity, safety, belonging, and success are increasingly being positioned as core institutional responsibilities. The 2024 *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Department of Education, 2024) reaffirmed ambitious equity goals. Subsequent developments, including the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission and the National Student Ombudsman, have strengthened expectations that institutions centre student experience in their governance and accountability to create evidence-informed improvements. Alongside heightened sector attention to gender-based violence and sexual harm, these shifts point to the need for approaches that move beyond reactive incident management and address the everyday conditions that shape students' experiences of safety, belonging, and inclusion. At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), this agenda has been advanced through the Respect.Now.Always. Strategic Framework (Malcolm, 2019), which adopts a whole-of-community approach to the prevention of gender-based violence and sexual harm. The framework recognises that safety and inclusion are shaped not only by policy, training, and response systems, but also by the everyday environments in which students learn, study, live, and work.



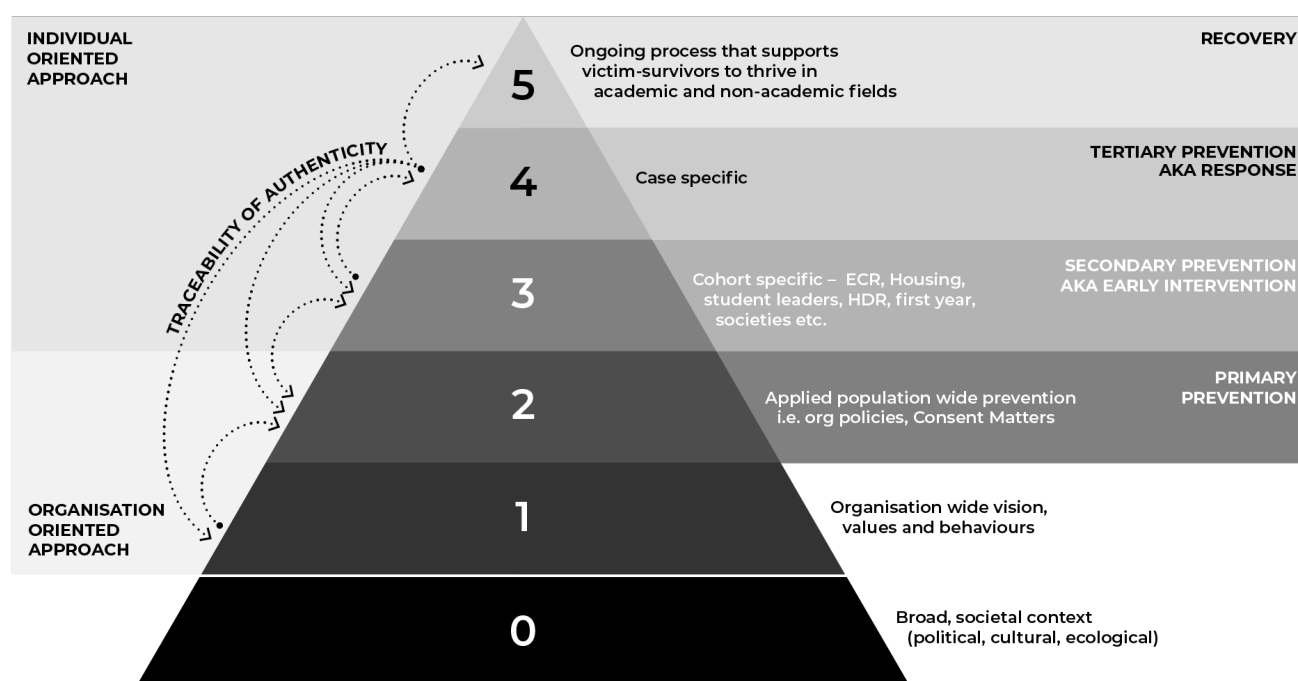
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Two early strategic principles shaped the operationalisation of this approach. First, prevention of sexual violence among students was understood as inseparable from broader community dynamics, necessitating a whole-of-institution framework. Second, rather than replicating externally developed interventions, the program adopted a contextually grounded methodology, working collaboratively across the university to understand the needs, capacities, and lived experiences of diverse community members.

Figure 1 presents the Prevention Pyramid used in this study, adapted from Our Watch (2021), Depuydt and Deklerck (2001), and Bronfenbrenner's (1989) socio-ecological model. The framework positions gender-based violence prevention as a multi-layered institutional responsibility. In this article, it is used to examine how formal prevention strategies intersect with the everyday social practices, spatial cues, and community norms through which students interpret safety and respectful behaviour in informal study spaces. The findings suggest that staff often understand prevention through formal institutional mechanisms, but students are more likely to encounter prevention at the level of everyday behavioural regulation and early intervention.

**Figure 1**

*Prevention Pyramid Framework*



*Note.* Adapted by C. Pruscino from Our Watch (2021), Depuydt and Deklerck (2001), and Bronfenbrenner's (1989) socio-ecological model.

University libraries, and informal study spaces more broadly, warrant closer attention. The 2021 National Student Safety Survey identified university libraries as one of the most frequently reported on-campus locations associated with sexual harassment. Nationally, 8.1% of students had experienced sexual harassment in a university in the previous 12 months, with 24.4% identifying the library as the location of harassment and 15.6% identifying the library as the location of their most impactful incident (Heywood et al., 2022, pp. 15–23). At UTS, the Library was identified as the second most frequently reported on-campus location associated with impactful experiences of sexual harassment. Yet little Australian research has examined how safety, respectful behaviour, and prevention are understood in university libraries and informal study spaces. As heavily used and symbolically significant campus environments, libraries shape students' everyday experiences of safety, visibility, and belonging.

This study was guided by the following research questions: how do students interpret, negotiate, and respond to respectful and disrespectful behaviour in informal study spaces, and how do these practices align with staff understandings of institutional

prevention? This research program was shaped by curiosity as to why university libraries are more prominently places where sexual harassment occurs. We took library space to broadly mean informal learning (or self-study) spaces within and outside the Library because all these spaces are managed through the Library at UTS. We listened to students and staff at UTS to understand their experiences of disrespectful behaviour on campus. The study examined how behavioural expectations are communicated, interpreted, and enforced in shared campus environments. This was explored through semi-structured interviews with students and staff, followed by student workshops using design thinking tools to test and refine interpretive insights and generate preliminary ideas for solutions. Informal study spaces are considered not simply as physical settings, but as social environments where students interpret norms, navigate risk, and develop a sense of whether they are welcome, visible, and safe.

## Literature Review

The 2021 National Student Safety Survey report identifies libraries as one of the main places where sexual harassment occurs on campus. However, no research has been undertaken into the nature, cause, and prevention of sexual harassment in Australian university libraries or study spaces more broadly. Research into prevention strategies at Australian universities has focused on plans relating to policy, promotion, and mandatory training (Burge, 2024; Henry, 2024).

Our research drew on concepts of both physical and cultural safe spaces. We examined student expectations for behaviour in informal learning spaces on campus, and worked with students to design solutions for improving safety. Bossert et al. (2025) offer a valuable conceptualisation of the role injunctive and descriptive norms play in learning environments, including their effect on individual learners. Our research approach also drew heavily from Banyard et al.'s (2004) theory that the best outcomes come from an understanding of shared community responsibility:

By presenting material about sexual violence in the context of discussions about sense of community and the interconnections between members of the community, individual and groups may begin to take on broader challenges in creating social change around these issues. (p. 70)

Our Prevention Pyramid framework similarly recognises interactions in informal learning spaces as operating across Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4, setting behaviour expectations through observations and experience of campus culture in real time and providing opportunities to act and react to challenging behaviours (Malcolm, 2019).

Significant research has been undertaken over the last decade into libraries as 'safe spaces'. 'Safe' is approached in several ways in the literature. Hanson and Abresch (2016) focus on the role of space design in creating a diverse range of spaces that suit differing groups, creating safety through spaces that reflect social norms. Interestingly, Goodnight and Jeitner's (2016) research demonstrates rising tensions between traditional library users seeking quiet space and the wider community engagement resulting from new creative and maker spaces in libraries. Research in academic libraries in the United States is increasingly focused on security. Ceccato et al. (2023) and Johnson et al. (2023) describe safety in terms of incidents and user perceptions of physical safety, with a focus on natural and technological surveillance as solutions. Lipinski and Saunders (2021) conversely argue for the reduction of barriers to create welcoming and safe spaces for clients, including removing fines, security cases, and book detection systems. Campus design clearly affects safety, inclusivity, and service delivery in the context of gender-based violence (Newport, 2026). But Newport's (2026) recent study of frontline staff insights on gender-based violence and the built environment at a South African university demonstrates that a safe campus is more than just security systems: "it also requires building a community of practice and a compassionate support system" (p. 40). Understanding staff and student perspectives on campus space, safety, and access to support is key to creating effective interventions to prevent gender-based violence.

Gibson et al. (2017) describe safety as a cultural construct where diverse groups are supported and welcomed through times of partisan turmoil, challenging ideas of the library as a neutral space that is inclusive, by avoiding conflict. This approach has been evidenced in behaviour-based studies in formal learning environments (Byron, 2017; McIntosh & Jagger, 2024). Janes et al. (2013) conducted an action research study at Teesside University in the United Kingdom which demonstrated the positive impact of setting clear behavioural guidelines for staff and students. Feedback from students on the first iteration of the guidelines changed the language from 'positive behaviour' to 'mutual respect' and broadened the scope to include all staff and all campus locations, emphasising the cultural construction of safety. Byron (2017) examined safe spaces in the classroom directly in the context of sexual harassment, using a queer theory lens to reframe traumatised students from victims requiring protection to valued participants with options to manage their own levels of safety.

## Method

Twenty-three face-to-face interviews with students, including three students who held formal representative roles within the institution, were held to develop an understanding of student experiences and expectations. Interview participants were recruited via institutional news, social media accounts, and posters around campus. Students were asked to provide basic demographic information to determine their eligibility and ensure a representative sample of the UTS population was obtained. Interviews followed a semi-structured style, with flexibility for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions at their discretion. The interviews explored students' expectations of behaviour in on-campus study spaces; how they defined respectful and disrespectful behaviour; and their experiences of disrespectful behaviour, if any.

Seven staff were interviewed to provide staff perspectives on respectful and disrespectful behaviour on campus. Suitable staff, including academic staff and unit leaders of student support, safety, and complaints were identified via stakeholder mapping and influence/interest mapping to ensure that all appropriate groups were considered. Staff were invited to participate by an unknown member of the project team to account for existing relationships and to avoid interviewees feeling obligated to participate in the study.

The project team undertook a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts using an inductive analysis of the data to create initial coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A series of workshops involving the whole project team identified key themes and sub-themes from the coded data. Individual empathy maps were also created for each interviewee, and these were used as a reflective tool to test the themes. The thematic analysis was used to create the five key insights discussed in the Discussion section of this article.

The workshop phase of the study used design thinking tools to test and refine the interpretive insights from interviews and to generate student-informed ideas for improving experiences in informal study spaces. Two student workshops were held with six to ten participants each. Project team members shared the themes and key insights from interviews and led group discussions, testing and refining the wording of the insights to better reflect the student voice. From here, students developed 'How might we' statements in response to the workshopped insights for solutions that focused on improving the student experience in informal study spaces.

## Results

The interview content from students and staff was coded and then analysed to create themes (Table 1). The thematic analysis from the interviews was used to create five key insights that were validated with students as part of a co-design process.

**Table 1**

*Definitions of Study Themes and Sub-themes*

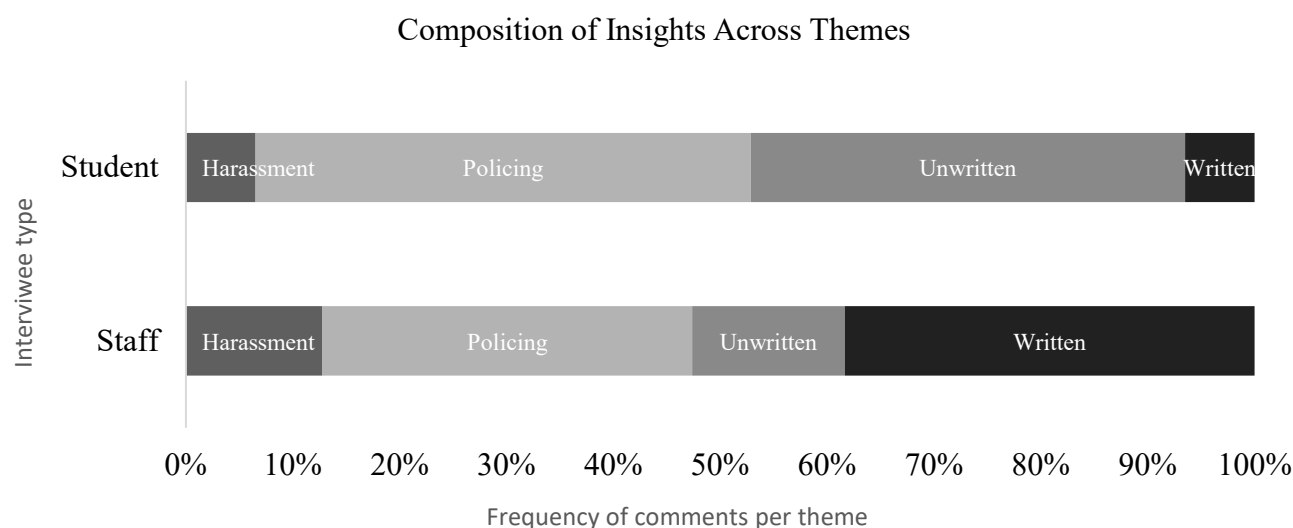
| Theme/Sub-theme               | Definition                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Understanding written rules   | Various ways in which behavioural expectations are formally/explicitly conveyed and understood          |
| Policy and Procedures         | Policy awareness, accessibility, and gaps                                                               |
| Reporting                     | Experiences and perceptions about reporting disrespectful behaviour                                     |
| Promoted                      | Observations and feedback on the communication of rules                                                 |
| Understanding unwritten rules | Various ways in which behavioural expectations are inferred                                             |
| Social and Cultural           | Details of behavioural expectations informed by intrinsic social and cultural values or norms           |
| Behavioural                   | Observed behaviours by others in the space conveying rules                                              |
| Environment                   | Spatial elements which convey or affect expected behaviours                                             |
| Policing                      | Responses to disrespectful behaviour and who should be enforcing expectations                           |
| Security and Staff            | Experience and expectations of security guards and university staff relating to disrespectful behaviour |

|                       |                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Peer                  | Experience and expectations of students enforcing behavioural expectations on one another                         |
| Self                  | Responding to and avoiding disrespectful behaviour by changing own behaviours                                     |
| Safety and Prevention | Actions or behaviours of individuals or an organisation to increase safety and/or prevent disrespectful behaviour |
| Harassment            | Relating to experienced or observed instances of harassment                                                       |

The frequency of response relating to specific themes showed a clear difference between students and staff, rather than student demographic differences (Figure 2). Staff were more likely to focus on written rules, policy and processes, and harassment, whereas students were more likely to describe behavioural expectations through unwritten rules, peer observation, and the perceived personal costs of intervention. Students often relied on reading the social cues of a space rather than formal signage, and some students were more likely to self-police in response to perceived risk. Students also talked less than expected about actual witnessed or experienced incidents of harassment. Staff more frequently discussed experiences of witnessed and actual harassment and focused on the need for policy and process development to set and manage behaviour expectations.

**Figure 2**

*Composition of Insights for Students and Staff Across Themes (Harassment, Policing, Understanding Unwritten Rules, and Understanding Written Rules)*



These findings suggest that prevention in informal study spaces must attend not only to policy and reporting structures, but also to placemaking, social norms, belonging, and the ways respectful behaviour is modelled, interpreted, and enacted in everyday campus life.

## Limitations

This study takes a qualitative approach to understanding students' perceptions and experiences of respectful behaviour in informal learning spaces within one university community. The insights gained from the interviews would benefit from being tested at a larger scale and across other university communities. The next phase of our research project is to survey students on their expectations and management of respectful behaviour on campus, and to test a series of co-designed solutions to gauge how students respond to prevention strategies resulting from our research. The clear trend in our current data is the difference between the perceptions and understandings of staff and students. This points to the potential for further research into staff perceptions and attitudes.

## Discussion

When reviewing the data, we expected to see some trends arise specific to different demographic groups. The results showed that students were in broad agreement with each other, although staff had significantly different positioning on the key themes. Below are our five key insights from the interviews.

### *Staff Feel Overwhelmed by Their Increasing Accountability for Disrespectful Behaviour on Campus*

Staff share a common understanding of the formal governance obligations and policies that frame university operations. They are focused on the primary prevention space (Levels 1 and 2) and response space (Level 4) within the Prevention Pyramid framework, without effective strategies for intervention and implementing change within the early intervention space (Level 3). Compliance measures focus on clear policy and process, so staff are investing energy into written rules and communications that set expectations. As one staff interviewee stated, “essentially when we need to, we refer students back to the student declaration, yes, to the Code of Conduct”.

Staff are more concerned with the questioning of policy and processes by students:

And I think the university does show a lot of respect to the students. And then they'll get upset because they might not like the decision because it doesn't suit their narrative. And when that happens, that's when we get issues.

If we gave instruction, it would, yeah, they wouldn't like it, but it was carried out. Now ... they want to question, question, question, question everything that might come down.

One complaint there really triggered me ... when I get triggered, it's about um, if somebody calls into question my ability to do my job, OK or accuses me of being disrespectful when I'm not that sort.

Disrespectful behaviour emerged as a central concern in staff accounts of everyday campus life, but staff responses are shaped by more than the behaviour itself. Staff described an increased visibility of such incidents, both witnessed directly and reported by others, alongside a growing sense of urgency about their responsibility to respond. As one staff member noted, “There is definitely a trend that we have seen in regard to disrespectful behaviour ... . There seems to be more and more”.

The newly introduced *National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence 2025* has created additional compliance requirements, including mandates for prevention for the first time, in an environment of reduced resourcing and staff redundancies within the higher education sector. While staff support the intent and value of the Code, there is clearly a sense of overwhelm as they attempt to make changes and meet compliance obligations in a resource-constrained environment.

Staff accounts indicate that the increasing legislative and policy focus on gender-based violence, racism, and student wellbeing has heightened expectations of accountability, intensifying pressure to identify and address problematic conduct:

There is a very fine line we're walking at the moment between academic freedom and freedom of expression and the protection of people's psychosocial wellbeing.

We've never made it to week three without any disrespectful behaviour [in a classroom setting].

Yet these concerns also reveal a deeper tension in how behaviour is understood and managed on campus. Staff tend to frame disrespectful conduct through formal institutional logics of policy, procedure, and compliance, whereas students appear more likely to navigate campus life by responding to the unwritten norms of particular spaces. This divergence is significant because it suggests that safety on campus is produced not only through institutional regulation, but through the ongoing social life of university spaces.

### *Students Are Confident in Reading the Room to Set Expectations for Behaviour*

In this article, ‘reading the room’ describes the everyday practice of interpreting social, behavioural, and environmental cues to infer what conduct is expected, tolerated, or risky in informal study spaces. We use the concept to show how respectful behaviour is regulated not only through formal institutional rules, but through descriptive norms and situated judgements about belonging, safety, and intervention.

The students interviewed all expressed a deep understanding of how expectations for behaviour in spaces were set through the observation of others' behaviour in that space:

Being mindful of what the noise level is when you walk into a space ... match the level ... when you walk in you can sense it pretty quickly ... . I don't think there's a huge rule there, I think it varies day to day ... on who's there and what time of day it is.

I think we kind of, I think everyone in that space adjusts it to how everyone else is ... . There is a standard that everyone holds themselves to, when you enter into it if it's a lot quieter, if you need to take a call ... people step out of the space.

Students respond to visual and noise cues around them in any given place, at any given time. For example, if a student is wearing headphones, then they don't want to be disturbed, so don't sit too close or make loud noise. If people are eating and talking in a space, then that is acceptable behaviour in that space. Students are agile in their approach to behaviour expectations, acknowledging that acceptable behaviour in a space may be different at different times. Students are not looking to the governance and training tools that the university offers in the primary prevention space (Levels 1 and 2) but are interacting with others in the early intervention space (Level 3) to understand and practice respectful behaviour. Furthermore, staff focussing on Levels 1, 2, and 4 of the Prevention Pyramid framework are not aware of or resourced for activities in the Level 3 early intervention space. That is to say, students and staff are operating on different levels.

Students are not, however, promoting an environment free of rules. Although the expectations may differ over time and in different spaces, the students all believe that acting in a way not aligned with the other people in that space is clearly disrespectful:

Can I eat or drink in the Library? But I see other people do it so I'm like oh, okay I can ... . If you feel the fact that people are a little bit quiet or in a serious time ... and you don't respect that, I think that's disrespectful.

In this context, written rules and signage mean little to students: "I haven't seen an overwhelming amount of signage that makes me super certain about what each space is. It's more like the general vibe I get in every room".

Not all students are equally skilled in their ability to 'read the room' and some students are frustrated by the lack of understanding of signals, such as wearing headphones or sitting too close. There is an opportunity to lean into the unwritten rules of campus spaces and use signage to clue in the less skilled students (or outside groups) to the student-set expectations for behaviour. Bossert et al.'s (2025) work considered the operation and influence of peer norms in formal learning environments. Our findings in informal learning spaces suggest that students' responses to disrespectful behaviour are shaped less by institutional messaging (injunctive norms) than by social cues and observed behaviours (descriptive norms).

Formal mechanisms alone may be insufficient where students' experiences of safety are shaped by tacit social dynamics rather than explicit rule breaches. The challenge for universities is not simply to strengthen behavioural rules as the Teesside University study suggests (Janes et al., 2013), but to better understand and engage the informal, relational, and context-dependent processes through which students make sense of conduct in everyday campus life. Safety, therefore, emerges not as a fixed institutional condition, something that can be managed through security and surveillance as suggested by Johnson et al. (2023) or Ceccato et al. (2023), but as something socially produced through the interaction between formal structures, lived experience, and the shared capacity to read and respond to the room.

### ***Students Who Feel Less Empowered Are More Likely to Self-police***

Students' responses to policing differed across the interview cohort. Self-policing was more commonly described by students who were not male and by students from language backgrounds other than English. Of the students who mentioned self-policing to avoid disrespectful behaviour, 73% were female or non-binary and 64% spoke a language other than English at home. These accounts suggest that some students experience informal study spaces as requiring heightened vigilance and behavioural adjustment:

I would feel uncomfortable being the only female with many men around me I didn't know [when studying late at night].

When I sit and study and I don't have a wall behind me I get an icky feeling when they walk behind me ... when someone's standing behind you get a weird feeling ... it's disturbing.

Paranoia, as well as like I'm a Hijabi so it's like ... yeah we have the current social cases and stuff [I don't study late on campus] to be more cautious.

These accounts show that 'reading the room' is not an evenly distributed or equally low-cost practice. Female students are very conscious of groups of male students and isolated spaces, and identified evenings as times of greater risk. The presence of security staff can increase feelings of discomfort rather than safety. International students are afraid and nervous about reporting disrespectful behaviour to staff because of language and cultural barriers. They are concerned that they may be misreading expectations and are unsure of how their complaint will be received.

The contribution of this finding is not that experiences of safety are unevenly distributed by gender, culture, or language background; this is already recognised across related fields. Rather, this study shows how those differences shape the everyday work of interpreting descriptive norms in informal study spaces. Students who described heightened vulnerability do not simply identify risk after it occurs. They described anticipatory practices: scanning the room; assessing who is nearby; positioning themselves in relation to exits, walls, or groups of other students; and deciding whether to remain in, leave, report, or avoid particular spaces. Self-policing is not only an individual coping strategy. It is also evidence of the uneven labour through which safety is produced and managed in shared campus environments. Prevention strategies for informal study spaces therefore need to make behavioural expectations more legible while also reducing the burden on students who currently manage safety through withdrawal, avoidance, or self-policing.

### ***Students Believe Everyone in Their 'Cohort' Has Shared Expectations***

In the interviews and the co-design workshop, students expressed the belief that respectful behaviour expectations are largely shared values within the university student community at UTS. However, the presence of outsiders to the community in the Library who did not have a shared understanding of the unwritten rules, such as high school students, was seen as a disruptive force:

[When defining bad behaviour] high school students ... . Talking and gossiping ... really closely to me.

High school students ... . I didn't think they'd be allowed in these spaces.

Social licensing of student behaviour is informed by their identity within the UTS context. Students are more likely to raise behaviour issues with people they know: "If one of my friends is doing that, I think I have to at least try and make them understand ... so they don't do it again". Students are also more likely to call out the behaviour of peers in the moment if they feel they are within their own community. Cohort spaces were frequently referred to in co-design sessions with students. Students don't necessarily seek restricted access for cohort spaces, but support the need for natural gathering places for sub-communities such as study discipline.

Students feel more confident in spaces where they identify others from the same sub-community within UTS. Faculty and cohort spaces are recognised as easier to navigate and manage by students:

People are always just studying or having lunch, but it's always quiet in [the Law Lounge] ... . It's probably just postgrad ... older people.

A space where everyone is focused on studying and that's everyone's shared goal for coming to that space.

Students are also more confident to peer-police where rights are clear and agreed. For example, booked group study rooms are seen as spaces where students are given temporary rights and agency by the booking process. These spaces are formalised by the booking system and we see the rise of injunctive norms. Students are more likely to ask other students to leave a group study room if they don't have a booking, and they are more likely to report issues to staff when students don't follow the booking rights of others. Further research is required to understand the effect of concepts of entitlement and students' sense of safety and belonging.

### ***Staff and Students Perceive the Cost of Policing Disrespectful Behaviour as Too High***

Staff expressed a lack of confidence and capacity to step into situations of disrespectful behaviour as an active bystander, nor did they see their role as responsible for intervening. The following quotes clearly articulate the personal reluctance of some staff to intervene:

We're not there to fix the problem because we're just not qualified or trained or, you know, we don't have the tools to do that.

If someone's getting screamed at in the library ... that's where I think other students would hopefully step in.

I wonder though ... it makes me think who should be doing that? Should it be students, is it unfair to ask staff to do that? I don't know.

Staff understand the obligation for intervention as within the formal rules and processes for student support, which prioritises broad active bystander capacity. Staff also acknowledged that neither staff nor students have the requisite skills to safely and confidently intervene.

Conversely, students are taking their lead from the behaviour they see practiced on campus, including whether staff respond to incidents of disrespectful behaviour: "And you'd have a lot of snide remarks or something being made, and there's no one to actually shut those down".

Students often talked about why they would not intervene in incidents of low- to mid-range disrespectful behaviour:

I was leaving, I knew I didn't have to stay with the tension ... . If I had stayed, I would have felt anxious. It's sometimes easier to move away than to confront people.

I'd just move myself. I'm very non-confrontational. And I think it would be intimidating if I was just by myself and I was asking a big group of people to quieten down.

It was not a good experience for me. I don't like to go to people and say they're doing something wrong. It's not a positive experience.

The discomfort and risk of managing low- to mid-level disrespectful behaviour is neither modelled nor rewarded. These quotes demonstrate how students manage themselves in preference to managing others' behaviour. The perceived cost and risk of intervention is too high.

Students and staff are not currently operating in the same spaces within the Prevention Pyramid framework. Students interpret deeply relational behavioural dynamics within informal learning space (Level 3), whereas staff rely on institutional logic (Levels 1 and 2) to shape student behaviour. Effective prevention culture will require staff to interact with students in early intervention (Level 3), not solely in response to behavioural incidents (Level 4). Behaviour is not governed solely by formal rules but is socially negotiated through everyday interactions and shared understandings of what is noticed, tolerated, and challenged.

### **Conclusion**

This study uses student and staff insights to explore how respectful behaviour is interpreted and managed in informal study spaces on campus and what this implies for prevention-oriented practice. Students described a sophisticated and socially situated understanding of behaviour expectations in informal study spaces on campus that differed from staff perceptions of both the problem and possible solutions. These findings suggest that institution-led strategies such as policy reform, signage, and online bystander training, while valuable, may be insufficient to address the everyday dynamics through which safety and belonging are negotiated in shared campus environments. Practitioners seeking to drive contextualised and culture-forward prevention initiatives should also interact with students on Level 3 (early intervention stage) of the Prevention Pyramid framework.

Students' capacity to 'read the room' and align their behaviour with local community expectations points to an important foundation for prevention practice. Universities can build on this by strengthening students' confidence in boundary setting and by recognising the role that non-exclusive sub-community spaces can play in supporting belonging and collective efficacy.

Female and non-binary students and those who speak languages other than English at home are more likely to self-police. This finding underscores the need to attend to gendered, cultural, and social differences in how safety is experienced and enacted, and to co-design prevention strategies with these cohorts. Targeted initiatives could look at awareness raising for other groups around how behaviours might be perceived as threatening, such as standing behind others or gathering in large groups in spaces where others are studying individually.

Finally, the findings show that students look to others in the university community for cues about how behaviour is managed and when intervention is expected. What students observed, and what staff described in interviews, is that many staff feel uncertain about their role in creating safer communities. Universities must support staff to understand their prevention role as a member of the university community, such as through developing staff confidence and capability as active bystanders. Safer and more respectful campuses are shaped not only by formal policy settings, but by the everyday practices through which community norms are modelled, reinforced, and shared. Ultimately, this study underscores that safety is socially produced in everyday campus life, and that effective prevention must therefore attend to relational, cultural, and environmental conditions through which campus norms are enacted.

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